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ABSTRACT

A basic public speaking/communication course at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, a general degree requirement, is using computer mediated technologies to make the class more innovative and applicable. The basic course should provide experiential knowledge of the fundamentals of delivering an effective presentation, and, in a more general sense, it must offer a backdrop of communication theories and propositions that situate the discipline of communication as central to being human. The innovation begins with the fact that the campus is on the Microsoft Exchange Network, and every student is allowed access. The network provides an excellent organizational tool for both students and course instructors. The Exchange incorporates "public folders" in which every department can post a listing so the entire University can visit the folders. The basic communication course folder contains specific categories that mirror the required speeches and corollary assignments, with folders for posting topics and other related information labelled for the several speeches each student has to complete. The more that public folders are used the more they might be relied on to transfer basic information, like the class syllabus and additional assignments that will enhance the students' learning. (CR)

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Utilizing Computer Mediated Technology in the Basic Communication Course: "Organizational Implications."

Organizing a basic public speaking/communication course, so that it will enhance the learning curve of today's college student has proven to be an interesting challenge. Over the past few years, the basic public speaking course has likely been one of the most innovative and progressively opportunistic courses that a student can choose to take. Here, at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, our Communication 101: Fundamentals of Oral Communication Course, is a general degree requirement. The University, in a universal attempt to provide today's professional world with competent and pro-active students, has undertaken the proper initiative, so that tomorrow's business person, lawyer, doctor, will not only be well rounded, but orally intelligent.

Besides the crop of students that would chose to improve on their communication skills, we, have a peculiar predicament. What we need to be offering, is a general course that is designed to do two things: First, we should provide experiential knowledge of the fundamentals of delivering an effective presentation; and second, in a more general sense, we must offer a backdrop of important communication theories and propositions that situate the discipline of communication as central to being human. By the end of the class, we should have given the students a strong resource to be used outside the classroom in whatever endeavors they may undertake.

In order to meet both of these demands, our course has two components: the discussion group and the mass lecture. The mass lecture serves as a forum to expose the students to important communication theories and propositions. As well, the mass lecture has been used as a connection point between important communication theories and the students' speeches. We feel, that a student, who is aware of what is happening in the discipline might be better suited to meet tomorrow's challenges as they prepare themselves for a career. The second component, and the primary one for the student, is the discussion group.

A teaching assistant leads the discussion group, which usually numbers around 20-25 students. There are ten teaching assistants, who are assigned to three sections each. In these

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discussions, each student is required to deliver 6 speeches (introduction, a personal story, oral interpretation, an informative speech on events that happened on their birthday, a more general informative speech, a persuasive/policy speech, and an Epideictic speech). For every speech, the student is required to meet specific guidelines that attempt to enhance the effectiveness of their presentation skills. So, that by the end of the course, the experiential learning will be evident in the student and it will be reflective of a decent progression of the student's presentation skills.

To make more important, the progress of the student, we have employed several structural methods that push the student to work on, and realize their progression as a speaker. First, we ask that they offer critical feedback to each other in the discussion groups, either written or orally. Second, we require three separate assessments that allow the student to be their own critic. To better facilitate this part of the class, we require the student to videotape their speeches. This provides an extraordinarily important service to the student. It, of course, allows them to return to their speech and see for themselves what they have improved on, and what they might need to do to improve their next speech.

The culmination of these aspects to the class, we feel, offers the student a comprehensive educational experience that undeniably is one of the most important courses a student can take, if not at least the most applicable to graduating with professional presentation skills. But, as the world turns its eyes towards accepting more complicated technologies, we, as innovators of public speaking and professional presentation courses, cannot turn our backs to what is available for our use.

The campus is on the Microsoft Exchange network. This allows each and every student, who is registered at the University, to have access to the same network technologies. Because Microsoft Exchange provides a centralization of the network, we are able to deal with every student in the same technological manner. This is the biggest asset to incorporating the use of the Exchange Network into the Basic Course because it minimizes the use of several and different technologies.

For starters, the Exchange network operates as an excellent organization tool for the students and the course's instructors. Besides some of the basic features like, e-mail, the Exchange network incorporates Public Folders whereby, each and every department can post a listing so that the entire University can "visit" their folder. Now, not only are the

students able to practice using computers on the same server, but also they have a specific place to visit Communication 101.

Currently, we are designing a method to use the Public Folders to better facilitate the organizational structure of our basic course. Primarily, our invitation to the student to use the Public Folders amounts to, right now, a small set of general statements about daily activities. In the design and partition of our class' site, we have separated the general folder into specific categories that mirror exactly the required speeches and corollary assignments. There are folders for posting topics and other related information, that are labeled for the several speeches each student has to complete. For the most part, our initial use is to allow the students to post their topic, thesis statement, and maybe an outline. Because there are no special provisions discarding the students use of the speech folders, they are able to check each other's postings so topics are not repeated.

For use with corollary assignments, designated folders are provided for each section. Each student is able to post their assessments (class goals, informative and policy). This aspect of the folders may not be so directive in the daily operations of the class, but, it requires the student to become more familiar with the Public Folder configuration, and it allows the teacher and the student, again, a central organizational forum. Easily, a beneficial aspect of organizing the class for the instructors, this service for the student exposes, maybe what can be expanded inside the folders, and maybe if there are any limitations to using the Folders to conduct the written aspects of the basic course.

Finally, one basic addition of our "site," is an initial folder from the Director, and a folder for postings from any of the instructors. Combining these two folders provide, for the administrators of the class a central organizational feature that, likely, will enhance cohesion from discussion group to discussion group. These folders are designed to house postings that are important to all students, no matter what section they are in. Currently, these folders house instructions on using the Public Folders and review questions for exams. Since, this offers the students the same information that any other student might attain, our ability to teach the class through several sections depends upon a certain amount of cohesion and conformity. This outlet provides exactly this service.

The advent of using the Public Folders in the basic course has provided some interesting challenges and even more possibly interesting future applications. Some of the things that we are considering are adding more folders to enhance the students' feedback to

each other's speeches, and maybe the course. As well, the more we use the folders, the more we might rely on them to transfer basic information, like the class syllabus, and additional assignments that will enhance the student's learning. We could also, if technologically available, download and insert texts or audio-visual examples from the Internet for the individual student or the entire group. As we start to make a list of things, we also start to realize the potentialities of available technologies. It seems everyday we are adding suggestions to enhancing the use of Public Folders.

The current climate for the Basic Course is one that exports progression, innovation and breeds experiential learning that, well, most modestly, students just don't get from any other course. That is why we feel, for whatever technology is available for us, we must meet the challenge of using it to make better the student's learning experience. It is clearly essential that students accept, in some measurable form the benefits of computer mediated technologies. That is our central aim by employing Public Folders.

The public concern over graduating competent professionally literate students may serve as the backdrop for our integration of computer mediated technologies, but it cannot become the focus of the class. So long as we are making the class more innovative and applicable so that the student can use their basic course experience outside the classroom, then we have probably met most of our goals. The object of experiential learning should be that students use what we have taught them in ways we may not have even considered yet. This is where we feel the addition of public folders, to coin Lee Thayer, is "to make be, what might be."